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# The Heshbon Dig to Date

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# The Heshbon Dig to Date

By Eldyn Karr, Staff Writer

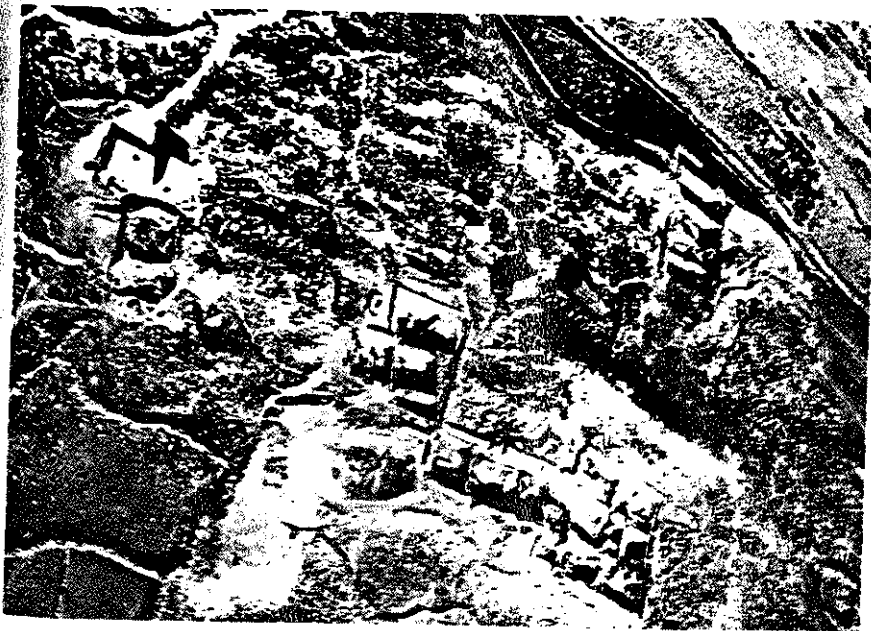
Photos by Alvin Trace

With two successful seasons of excavations already completed, the third, and probably final, dig at Heshbon, Jordan, is being planned by Dr. Siegfried H. Horn, chairman of the Old Testament department at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. A dozen faculty and students from Andrews University will join his 50-member expedition next summer from June 27 to August 21.

Heshbon is a 50-acre, 2800-foot-high limestone mound, 16 miles south of Jordan's capital, Amman. Among reasons for choosing to excavate there were the facts that it had been an important biblical city, the site had never been touched by archaeologists, a new hardtop road made the site accessible, it was close to the capital city, water and local labor were readily available, and the mound was owned by the government, thus al-



**HESHBON MOUND.** The question arises, "Is this the same Heshbon spoken of in the Bible that existed during Moses' time?"



lowing work to be done without purchase or rental.

However, one of the most important reasons for choosing Heshbon as a site for excavation, rather than another of the scores of biblical sites not yet explored by archaeologists, was the need to determine the date of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and entrance to Canaan, a date that is disputed by biblical scholars.

Aerial view of "Tell Hesban's" acropolis, with the excavated areas clearly visible. Elsewhere, under the rock-strewn surface, ancient walls can be traced. Across the wadi to the west (upper left) a portion of the ancient cemetery serves the modern villagers as a series of animal pens.

A minority, including Adventists, accept a date of about 1450 B.C., which is supported by chronological statements in the Bible (I Kings 6:1; compare Judges 11:26). The majority, however, accept a date in the 13th century B.C., based on apparent evidence that the ancient kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom in what is now Jordan were not even inhabited before the 13th century B.C. If the latter is true, the taking of Heshbon, capital of the Amorite king, Sihon (Numbers 21), could scarcely have taken place before that date.

It appears now that the excavations at Heshbon may not give support to either a 1450 B.C. or 1280 B.C. date for the Exodus. Bedrock has already been reached in several places—but the earliest materials found have been of the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.

Dr. Horn notes that it is still possible that earlier objects may be found during a thorough search of the Heshbon area next summer. Most excavating in the first two seasons was done on the acropolis of the



**ROLLING-STONE TOMB.** The meter stick gives an idea of the size of the entrance to a rolling-stone tomb, the first to be discovered east of the Jordan river.

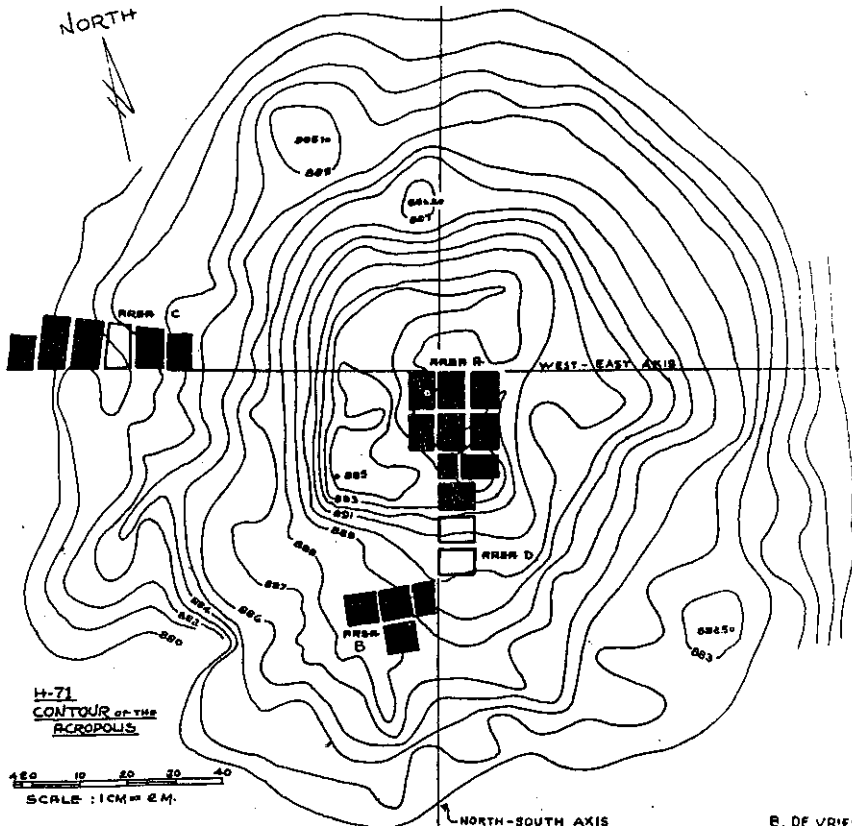
mound; the lower parts of the city are expected to be similar to the acropolis. To confirm this, and to be sure nothing has been missed, lower parts of the mound will be sampled in 1973.

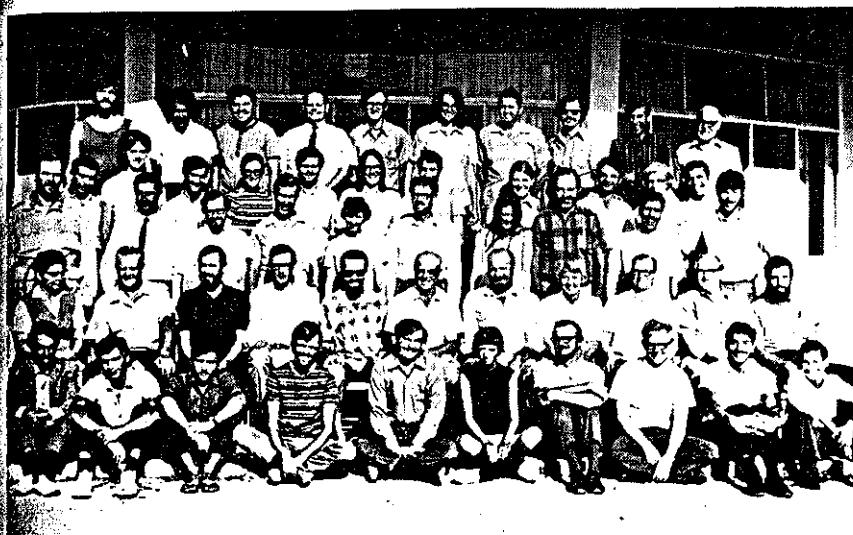
A topographical survey of the entire Heshbon area will also be made to see whether any other site has more potential for excavation as the site of the Heshbon of Moses' time. The present site has definitely been Heshbon since the time of Jeremiah and Isaiah, according to Dr. Horn,

and because of that was traditionally considered the Heshbon of Moses' times as well. What may have happened is that the name Heshbon was transferred to the site presently being excavated, following the abandonment of the original site somewhere in the vicinity. Even if surface remains from Moses' time can be found nearby, Dr. Horn feels excavation there is unlikely this season.

Whether or not objects from Moses' time are discovered, the three years of excavations will not be termed a

A contour map of the acropolis of Heshbon shows the positions of A to D. The squares worked in the 1971 excavations are shown in solid color.





The 52 staff members of the 1971 Heshbon expedition included professionals and students from six foreign countries and Jordan. Archaeological work requires more than archaeologists; the 1971 Heshbon expedition roster also listed a geologist, a surveyor, an architect, two photographers, and an anthropologist.

Jordanian army and Palestinian guerrillas.

The second successful season at Heshbon, in the summer of 1971, involved a professional and student staff of 40 foreign and 12 Jordanian members, plus 140 Jordanians hired from local villages to do the actual manual labor under the supervision of the staff. It was a diverse group that lived and worked together for seven weeks. Most of the foreigners were U.S. citizens, but others were nationals of Canada, Britain, Norway, Germany, and Holland. Besides 19 Adventists, there were members of the Lutheran, Methodist, Swedenborgian, Catholic, and Baptist churches. Jordanians in the group were of the Islamic faith. There were 16 professors, 18 graduate students, an editor, and a medical doctor.

Dr. Horn, a veteran of 17 archaeological expeditions, declares, "On no excavation have I worked with a group that was more united in its organization than the group taking part in the Heshbon expedition of 1971."

Archaeological work requires more than archaeologists; the 1971 Heshbon expedition roster also listed a geologist, a surveyor, an architect, two photographers, and an anthropologist.

A geological survey of the site identified 59 kinds of stone, most of them used as building material. The surveyor and architect together made a topographical survey of the mound, and drew plans of all major architectural remains discovered. Anthropological studies of the bone material found indicate animals at Heshbon included at least 18 kinds of quadrupeds, 11 kinds of birds, 2 kinds of reptiles, and 3 kinds of fish, plus mussels and snails.

Photographers had to prepare pictures of more than 900 objects discovered, as well as daily field shots of the excavations. Toward the end of the season, a permit was granted by Jordanian authorities for making aerial photos to show topographical details of the mound configuration; these photographs are aiding in choosing the best areas of the mound to dig next summer.

Dating of the layers of material or structural remains at an archaeological site is dependent on the collecting, processing, and evaluation of pottery from the various levels. Potsherds—the rims, handles, bases, and fragments of the bodies of ceramic vessels—are studied for unique shape, texture, or decoration by a trained expert. Digging at Heshbon in 1971 unearthed 200,000 such pieces of pot-

tery; 22,000 sherds were selected to keep as representative samples for further study and reference.

Heshbon is the first site in which fine, seventh/sixth century Ammonite pottery has been discovered in a stratigraphically controlled excavation.

Other objects found included glass, gold, coins, beads, and iron nails. In one house that was excavated, a hoard of 66 Arabic coins, silver on a bronze core, had been stashed away inside a clay lamp. The remains of what was probably a stillborn baby were found buried under the floor of the same building.

One of the largest cisterns found in any excavation is at Heshbon. More than 30 feet deep, 25 feet long, and 13 feet wide, it has a capacity of more than 70,000 gallons.

Impressive remains of the Byzantine period, which preceded the Arabic, is a Christian church, apparently destroyed during the Persian invasion of Palestine in 614. The size of the church will be determined when its excavation is completed in the third season at Heshbon.

A find of particular interest and importance during the last dig was a rolling-stone tomb, so-called because its entrance was closed by a rolling stone, four feet in diameter and one foot thick. Only a few such tombs had previously been found, all of them west of the Jordan River; the Heshbon tomb is the first of this architectural style discovered east of the Jordan. The type of tomb is of special interest to Christians because the body of Jesus was placed in a rock-hewn tomb whose entrance was closed with a rolling stone.

More common, but still seldom found, is a type of tomb whose stone door operates on hinges. One of these was also discovered at Heshbon, along with examples of other ancient tombs.

Plans for the 1973 dig are to finish every area in which work has been started, proceeding down to bedrock in each square. Little new digging will be started, except to link areas already begun.

Whether or not the excavations at Heshbon eventually lead to evidence to support an early date for the Exo-

(Continued on page 7)